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**REWRITING TRUTH:  
THE END OF THE NARRATIVE ACT  
IN TWO SOUTHERN CONE DETECTIVE NOVELS**

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*I*n the pages that follow I would like to reread two novels with you. “Nothing very special about that,” you might say. After all, most of us who write for and read papers like this one work in universities, those places that Matei Calinescu calls “institutions of rereading” (213). As students, professors, and critics of literature we obviously tend to be drawn not to those texts that exhaust themselves in one reading, but rather to those that stick with us, those that nudge us toward new approaches to other texts, those that after a first reading give us something to do other than to look for the next title in a series. In short, we deal in our classrooms and our professional meetings primarily and almost exclusively with texts that are for rereading. So it might be, in fact, that the rereading I do in this paper is nothing very special. I urge you, however, to read on. Even if this paper contains a rereading of the sort that is standard in our discipline, in what I propose there is, I think, something useful to those of us who continue to try to get a grasp on genre fiction, and in particular fiction from the Southern Cone that works in, around, and against traditional detective genre rubrics. My critical approach here is to look at one detective novel that is overtly for rereading and one other that in most key aspects looks like an entirely readable, linear detective story. By accepting the invitation to reread extended by the first of these novels and bringing the two texts face to face, I, in essence, resist the narrative closure and the firm establishment of fictional truth established by the second – that is, I reject its implicit invitation to read rather than reread and underline moments that resuscitate its textual dead end. In so doing, a primary consideration of mine is to call

into question the readable/rereadable binary that is present, if only as an assumption, in a good deal of criticism on detective fiction and other purportedly popular genres. It is my sincere desire that my rereading will be both readable and rereadable.

Writers and critics of the detective genre have for a very long time been interested in the notion of rereading. Traditional texts in both of the genre's most common subcategories, the analytical detective story and the hard-boiled novel, are seen most often as texts written for reading but not for rereading. As John Irwin puts it, the genre in its traditional forms "discourage[s] unlimited rereading associated with serious writing" (198) because the solution "is always in some sense an anticlimax that in dissipating the mystery exhausts the story's interest for us" (199). Irwin himself along with countless others, however, have traced even in the earliest roots of the genre a type of detective story that rewards readers who are willing to continue working beyond the closing pages wherein truth is revealed and stability reestablished. Juan José Saer's *La pesquisa* (1994) is just such a text. Parts of the novel, and in particular the first long fragment that recounts a series of murders in Paris, are narrated very much like a traditional detective novel. Not until the second fragment do we learn that the third-person voice we had assumed to be that of a removed omniscient narrator is really that of Pichón, a character who is in Argentina telling the Parisian story to a pair of friends. There are in the intersections between the detective story and the story of the three friends (told in alternating fragments) more than sufficient complications to merit rereading: 1) the three friends are embroiled in another sort of detective story as they attempt to determine the authorship of a manuscript; 2) in the background of their story are the disappearance of Pichón's brother during the military regime and an uncomfortable silence regarding such events that Pichón seems determined to fill with his detective story; and 3) a here/there duality complete with corresponding symmetries and asymmetries reminiscent of Cortázar's "lado de acá"/"lado de allá" structure in *Rayuela* colors several aspects of Pichón's acts of observing in Paris and retelling in Argentina. These are just three of several possible points of departure for focussed rereadings of the novel. It, then, is a rereadable text long before the act of rereading is actually inscribed in the text itself. Pichón concludes his narration in fairly typical detective genre style recounting how the detective Morvan was caught and arrested at the scene of the last murder and detailing the report of a group of psychologists who explain how Morvan's mental state made it possible for him to commit the murders without being conscious that he was the criminal he had previously been seeking. At this point where a traditional detective novel might end, however, we are thrust back into the story of the narrator and the two friends who are listening to the story, one of whom, Tomatis, immediately initiates rereading by responding, "Es posible" (162). Instead

of accepting the closure Pichón has given his narrative, Tomatis turns right back into the story and asks, “¿Pero por qué volver todo tan complicado? En física o en matemáticas, la solución más simple es siempre la mejor” (162-163). Tomatis continues to propose a new explanation of the murders in which he suggests a new criminal and a new set of motives and methods. In essence, his rereading of Pichón’s narrative, like most good rereadings, becomes a rewriting of the story’s ending.

Peter Hühn’s discussion of Gerard Genette’s distinction between story (what happened) and discourse (how we are told what happened) is instructive for my reading of *La pesquisa*.

However problematic this general postulate [distinction between story and discourse] may be in certain respects, classical detective fiction is based on the premise that a story and its presentation in discourse are distinguishable and that extracting the “true” story from the (invariably distorting) medium of discourse is a feasible as well as valuable enterprise. Of course, this is part of the genre’s ideology: when the detective finally narrates the “true story” of the crime, thus correcting its previous misrepresentation in discourse, the listeners are presented with merely another version of discourse (which, however, purports to be congruent with the story itself). (Hühn 452n)

In *La pesquisa* the narrator, Pichón,--rather than the detective for obvious reasons--gives the true story at the end of his narration, but contained in the novel is a fictional reader’s inquiry into the purported congruency between this “final” narrative discourse and the true story. This fictional reader (through discourse, it must be noted) creates a new “true” story that is itself never fixed definitively as the ultimate true version. That is, although the veracity of Pichón’s version and the general reliability of Pichón as a narrator have been drawn into question by Tomatis’s rereading, neither Pichón’s version nor Tomatis’s are verified when we are returned to the voice of the perhaps higher-order, more removed third-person narrator of the novel’s last few pages. In fact, it is important to note that Pichón’s narration does not even preclude Tomatis’s rereading in the sense that Pichón never says directly that Morvan is the killer, only that that is the conclusion reached by the officials in Paris.

As follow-up to Hühn’s commentary on detective fiction, then, reference to Matei Calinescu’s work on rereadable detective fiction is also appropriate. Calinescu writes:

A game of rereading [...] can be played as slowly and with as many interruptions as one wishes. In it, guessing who is responsible for the crime (if there is a crime) is far less interesting than guessing the rules of the game; and the solution is not really a solution but an invitation or challenge to replay the game differently. (211)

I would amend Calinescu's observation only where he seems to place in opposition the act of "guessing who is responsible for the crime" and "guessing the rules of the game". In *La pesquisa*, and really in most detective fiction, the narrator himself is to some degree "responsible for the crime". On the one hand he is responsible for the telling of the crime, that final narrative to which he ultimately arrives after concluding his telling of the investigation story. But Pichón and most other narrators of detective stories who narrate from a chronological vantage point posterior to the events related are also responsible for a crime of a different sort when they withhold essential information, releasing it only in doses that allow gradual progress toward a solution without revealing so much that the reader's need to continue reading is compromised. Central to Pichón's version, for example, is a sleeping drug that Morvan put in the last victim's drink. We assume that Pichón has narrated everything Morvan has done before he loses consciousness and commits the murder while in a trance. The problem, however, is that the victim loses consciousness before Morvan which means that Morvan would have had to administer the drug to her drink at some point during that period of time for which the narrative is describing him as aware of his actions. Pichón's narrative, however, omits any reference to Morvan's tampering with the victim's drink. This means that either Tomatis's version, in which Lautret had previously planted the sleeping drug to the entire bottle thus knocking out both the murder victim and Morvan (the victim of his scheme), is correct or Pichón has engaged in a purposefully deceptive omission. Several key moments of the fragments in which Pichón and his friends investigate the manuscript provide support for reading Pichón as a potentially deceptive narrator. Early on, for example, he realizes that the manuscript can not possibly have been written by his deceased acquaintance, Washington, but as he solves for himself that mystery we read that, "su preocupación principal ha sido que esa convicción no se refleje en su cara" (62). What Michel Sirvent states in reference to texts like Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, in which the murderer turns out to be the narrator himself, or Benoit Peeters's *La bibliothèque de Villers* in which the narrator becomes a prime suspect, holds true for the fragments of *La pesquisa* narrated by Pichón: "the fundamental grounds of the narrative/reader contract is completely undermined: the narrative account as a whole becomes suspicious" (329).

A sentiment like Sirvent's coupled with my reading of *La pesquisa*'s ending brings me to my rereading of Marcela Serrano's *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (1999), a text that appears on the surface to be a much more traditional detective novel that can be exhausted in one reading. Most of private detective Rosa Alvallay's search for mystery writer Carmen Ávila departs little from conventions of the genre and at times even falls into clichés or rather forced moments constructed to advance the plot, such as the

episode in which Rosa meets Carmen's friend, Santiago Blanco, in a bookstore and Blanco conveniently goes off to the restroom just long enough for Rosa to look through the things he has left behind and to discover his plane ticket to Oaxaca – this when he had told her he was bound for Puerto Escondido. Rosa follows Blanco to Oaxaca where she uncovers Carmen's secret hiding place and is able to fill in all the remaining information gaps in a concluding interview with Blanco that reads very much like the wrap-up scenes in the typical series detective novel. Nevertheless, although there is no moment like Tomatis's "es probable" response and subsequent rewriting of the narration Pichón had just closed in *La pesquisa*, *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* ends with what I suggest is an option for the reader herself to revisit and reopen the text that has, on its surface, been closed. In the novel's final lines, Rosa, on a plane returning to Chile from Mexico, reflects, "No debo inquietarme, tengo siete horas por delante—no sólo para escribir de verdad la primera entrevista a Santiago Blanco—sino para inventar yo esta vez una novela negra" (247).

Whereas *La pesquisa* incorporates a new reading in the text itself, thus destabilizing the closure Pichón had given his story, *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* incorporates only a final reference to a new act of writing that will occur after the time frame referred to in the text we read. In this new text Rosa will presumably concoct a false story of Carmen's violent death so that the private life the writer has carved out for herself can continue uninterrupted. The ending, then, is structurally similar to that of *La pesquisa* in the sense that both texts end with reference to dual competing versions of the crime/disappearance story. A key difference is that *La pesquisa* leaves the veracity of Pichón's and Tomatis's versions on more or less equal footing while *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* tells us outright that the version Rosa will write for her employers and clients is fabricated. At least in a first reading of Serrano's novel, we readers have been given access to privileged insider information, a fictional truth that Rosa will reveal to nobody else.

Rereading the novel alongside Saer's, however, gives us cause for suspicion. If we return for a second reading of *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* armed with such suspicion, we give a different sort of attention, for example, to Rosa's intense reading of Carmen's novels, her feeling of intimate attachment to and identification with the object of her search, and passages like the one in which Rosa associates her own dreams with Carmen's daring escape from a limiting existence: "Pienso que lo que ha hecho C.L. Avila [Carmen] no se distancia tanto de nuestra fantasía" (225). I propose that these and similar moments in the text provide support for a rereading of *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* in which the few questions that are left opened if we read the novel as a standard detective story — What exactly is the content of Rosa's falsified account? Will Rosa's false story be believed?, Will it be possible for Carmen to continue her new life?— might lead us to

other questions that require serious rereading: Is the story Rosa will turn in to her superiors a false story at all? Might she be turning in to them the real story and writing for us the false one? Of course we could force similarly speculative rereading questions on even the most formulaic of detective stories but *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad*, I propose, rewards these rereading questions with new possibilities for interpreting several key moments of the text. Rosa, for example, reads all Carmen's novels and, as a result, she is, in our first reading, able to identify with Carmen enough to track her down. A second reading might downplay the professional objectives of Rosa's consumption of Carmen's writing and underline its more personal outcome. Our first reading assumes that Rosa, steeped in fiction and identifying strongly with a fiction writer, creates a fiction only for her clients and employers. If she is willing to lie to her superiors, though, might she not be just as willing to lie to us? Might she not fulfill her professional duties by writing a painful, true story—suicide, kidnapping, or murder — but to compensate for those hard truths by later writing for herself and for her implied reader a more pleasant fiction? Rosa's clients and employers are, like Pichón's two friends, recipients of a narration. In *Lapesquisa*, however, the novel's reader reads exactly the same narration that those characters hear. *Nuestra Señora*, on the other hand, sets the reader of the novel apart from the other recipients of narrative by assuring us at the end that we know the truth and that those other readers will read lies constructed to protect Carmen's new life. But the very moment that Rosa tells us she has gone into Carmen's Oaxaca house, she is already thinking about the usefulness of truth relative to the usefulness of invention. In that passage, we read, "El pasado es sólo lo que hoy queda de él — aunque subjetivo y mentiroso—, no los verdaderos hechos sino lo que el corazón siente como cierto luego de la labor del tiempo en su trabajo de decantarlos. La verdad literal no sirve para nada" (208). She is referring here specifically to the fact that Carmen has no suitcases with her in Oaxaca but the sentiment she expresses alerts us in rereading to the possibility that our version of events is an invented one, the version Rosa wants to feel is true after the long process of decanting what she discovers in her investigation.

Heta Pyrhönen's distinction between "Whodunit?" and "Who is Guilty?" (18) is also instructive in contrasting Saer's and Serrano's narrative endings. In *Lapesquisa* "Whodunit?" is a question answered differently by the police in Pichón's narrative and by Tomatis in his rereading of the story Pichón tells. There remains, as I developed earlier, a question of Pichón's own guilt or innocence in the narrative: Did he purposefully mislead to obstruct a clear reading of his story? In *Nuestra Señora*, the question is not, "Is Rosa guilty?" – because whether the false version is the one she will give the police or the one she has given us, she is guilty either way. In both the first reading and the second reading I have suggested, the novel is, perhaps

primarily, the story of a how a detective's investigation leads her to a decision to lie, whether she lies to us or to her clients and employers. By proposing a rereading of *Nuestra Señora* we open the question of precisely which code she has broken. Has she violated the rules of the detective story by misleading us in the telling of both the investigation story and the crime story or has she violated the professional code of conduct attached to her job as a truth finder by finding the truth but then constructing a falsehood for her superiors? If *La pesquisa* is more a metaphysical detective story of the sort that, according to Merivale and Sweeney, asks, "What can we know?" (2), *Nuestra Señora* asks instead, 'What does a detective do with knowledge once she has obtained it?' And perhaps more importantly, to whom does the narrating detective have ultimate responsibility?: Herself? The police? Her client? The victim? The reader?

In essence, I read *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* as a *novela negra* disguised as a detective novel. Or, to put it another way, it is a detective novel whose ending leaves open the opportunity for a second reading of the text as a *novela negra*. Rosa writes two stories (two novels): one is a detective story whose primary departure from genre norms is the detective's decision not to tell anyone but us the truth once she has uncovered it; the second story is a false story that she compares to a *novela negra* and that she will submit in order to satisfy her clients' and her employers' demand for closure with complete answers to all questions in both the investigation and the crime/disappearance narratives. We are left in a first reading of *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* with a reference to this second act of writing and the consciousness of a text whose contents we can only guess. We can not, after all, read it. I propose, however, that we can at least partially read this second text in a second reading of the first. Rosa, during the course of her investigation, comes to identify strongly with Carmen, a woman who writes creatively for a living. In the story Rosa narrates to us, Carmen is admirable not only for the creative writing she does in her novels but also for the creative new story she writes for her life. Might not we read this story of Carmen's new life as a product of Rosa's intensive reading of Carmen's fiction, her subsequent identification with the mystery writer, and an awakening of her own desire to create? Rosa is a professional who as part of her routine work reconstructs the facts of a crime story then writes non-creative narratives of that story in official documents. In my first reading of *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad*, Rosa tells us, her implied detective story readers, the real story and concludes it with her inspired decision to dupe her clients, her employer, and other officials with a false story. She is in that first reading a detective whose identification with the object of her investigation and her admiration for that individual's creativity and decisiveness brings her to her own creative decision to value Carmen's newfound private life above her own professional obligation to uncover then to reveal officially



the truth. Telling a creative (false) story in the official report she writes is, however, extremely risky given that it seems not at all improbable that Carmen would be found or that she would reveal herself at some point in the future, thus most likely ending Rosa's career or worse. My second reading resolves the question of such an illogical risk by proposing that Rosa's creativity was indeed inspired by her intense investigation of Carmen and that she did indeed write creatively. Rather than her writing a risky falsified version to dupe her clients and her employers and to satisfy their demand for a closed story, however, it makes at least as much sense that she would write creatively for us or, that is, for an implied reader of detective fiction who expects to have the truth revealed near the story's end and who, by virtue of existing on a different level of reality, is not in a position to relieve Rosa of her duties should we discover evidence that the story she has told us is not true. Rosa, in this second reading, becomes a detective who has uncovered a tragic ending to a tragic life but who has fulfilled her own need for a satisfying ending by finishing the straightforward version she produces in official documents then continuing to write creatively a new version for us. My second reading thus inverts the first-reading sequence of the detective who tells us the real story and ends by referring to the false story she will write for others.

I wish to be clear about one matter before closing. By proposing this inverted second reading, I do not intend to suggest that it is a more accurate reading of *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* than the first reading I develop. To do so would be to fall into just the trap I suggest should be avoided. That is, Rosa mentions her second text at the end of the novel and we are thus aware of two versions of the story for two audiences. To assume that we are the audience Rosa has chosen to tell the true story is, I propose, to read the novel as a traditional detective story that exhausts itself in a first reading and that contains nothing at all that lends itself to rereading. A second reading that assumes necessarily that we are the audience to whom Rosa has chosen to tell the false version would be just as shortsighted. The primary thrust of my second reading is, then, that the second text that Rosa says she will write at the end of *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* has a far greater function than simply adding to the reader's satisfaction of knowing the truth an even more satisfying knowledge of having been included in an exclusive insider group that got the real story. The reference to the other text is an invitation to reread the first one and, I propose, can work to destabilize the clarity the narrative has given to the investigation and disappearance stories. It disassembles that which traditional detective novels typically assemble in their final pages, a complete accounting of the crime story. Just as Tomatis disassembles Pichón's denouement, Rosa's reference to the second act of writing brings us as readers back into a reevaluation of her other act of writing and, in particular, to her account of the trip to Oaxaca and the final meeting with

Santiago Blanco in which he ties up all the story's loose ends, the same loose ends our second reading promptly unties.

John Irwin, describing the central problem encountered by writers who seek to create rereadable detective fiction, asks the question, "How does one both present the analytic solution of a mystery and at the same time conserve the sense of the mysterious on which analysis thrives?" (Irwin 199). *La pesquisa* and *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* both answer the question by textualizing rereading in a way that undermines the veracity of the crime story's telling. *La pesquisa* does so with a rereading character and *Nuestra Señora* with a rewriting narrator. Saer's rereading character proposes a new reading that the narrator's version did not account for. In the case of Serrano's story, we are given no models for our potential rereadings and are drawn by the novel's affinities with standard genre conventions to accept the narrator's final explanation of the truth. The narrator's act of rewriting at the novel's end, however, alerts us to the existence of two versions. Even though Rosa explicitly states that our version is true and her report will be false, we have only to put ourselves in the place of Rosa's employer and client to undo our certainty regarding the story she has told us. Those other readers are also reading a story Rosa has told them is true. In spite of the novel's apparent closure, we would do well to remember Calinescu's observation cited earlier that "guessing who is responsible for the crime [...] is far less interesting than guessing the rules of the game." If in the process of guessing the rules of the game we reread Rosa's assertion that the version we have read is true and the other version false, we might hear echoed in *Nuestra Señora*'s ending the words with which Margaret Atwood ends her story, "Murder in the Dark": "by the rules of the game, I must always lie. Now: do you believe me?" (29-30). Rosa does not have to lie always but we know she has lied at least once. Her story is a good deal richer if we do not preclude the possibility that she has lied to us. In such a reading the novel is, among other things, a parody of our own expectations in the genre. Even though Rosa tells us she has made the decision, atypical for the genre, not to reveal the facts to the authorities, we still get what we paid for, a solution. Textualized in the novel, however, is the suggestion that a truer story might have been told elsewhere and that the solution we have been given in a first reading does not have to signal the end of the game we play with the text.

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